

A TMT Guide to Good Relations in Social Studies Education

Kim Edmondson



*We can never go back. I know that now.
We can go forward. We can find the love
our hearts long for, but not until we let go
grief about the love lost long ago, when
we were little and had no voice to speak
the heart's longing.*

--bell hooks (2001)

*“what’s the problem?” dr.coyote grinned
“It’s this crow won’t leave me alone
trying to figure out what to do about it”*

--Karlee D. Fellner (2019)

A Dedication



To my fellow
teachers:

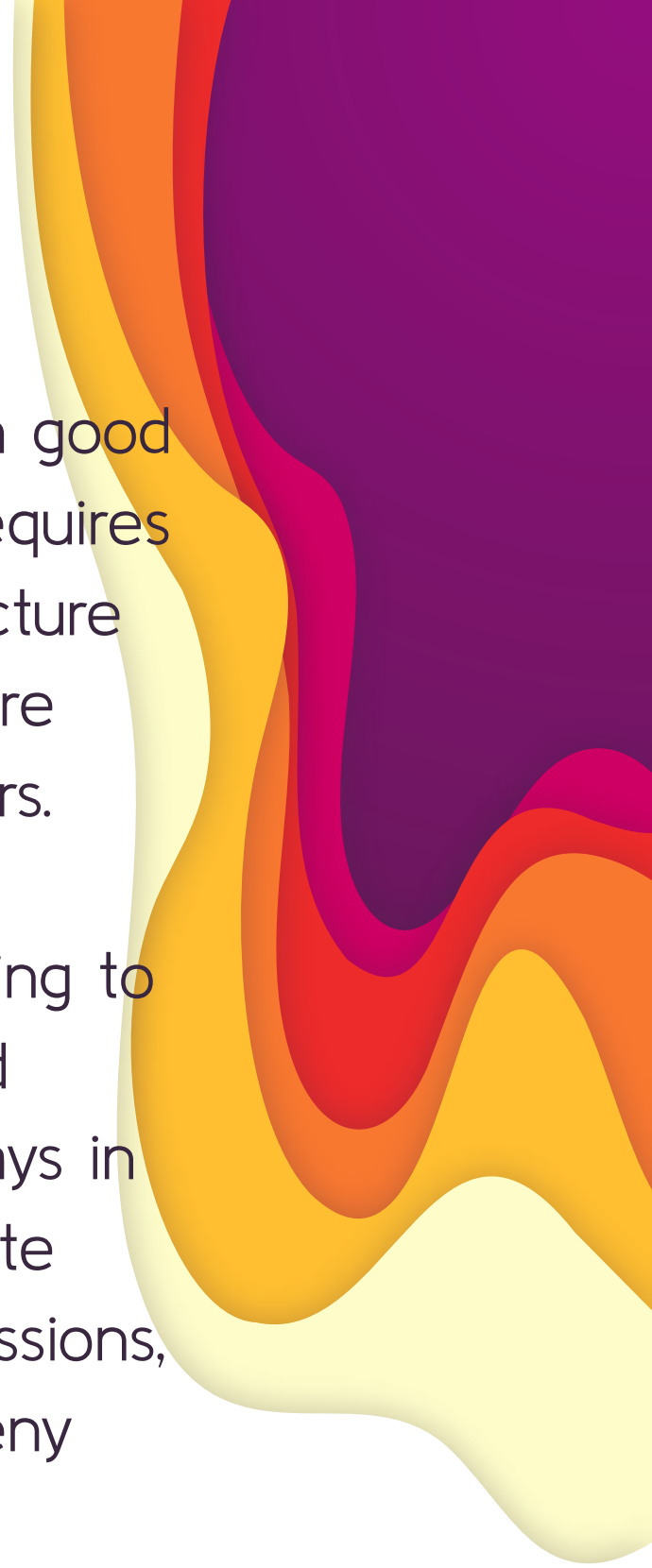
In pursuit of the
remarkable, we
foreclose the
unremarkable.

Yet, it is in those
unremarkable
moments, we
might hear a
shatter.

A Call

What does it mean to live in good relations? Living in relation requires becoming aware of the structure of relations and where we are positioned in relation to others. Living in relation can be transformative if we are willing to confront our positionality and implicate ourselves in the ways in which colonial logics propagate centuries-old systemic oppressions, prevent reconciliation, and deny healing from old, yet open wounds.

Social studies education can encourage such transformation in the classroom.



A Caution

Transformation is difficult work. Living in good relations requires a commitment much deeper than simply acting nice, tolerant, or accepting. Living in good relations requires a deep and honest look at the colonial logics that shape one's cultural worldview and how and why we protect our cultural worldview, even if it causes harm to ourselves and others. This work can be especially difficult for those who stand to benefit from colonial logics and racism. Borrowing from Crenshaw (2016), it's hard to solve a problem you can't see.





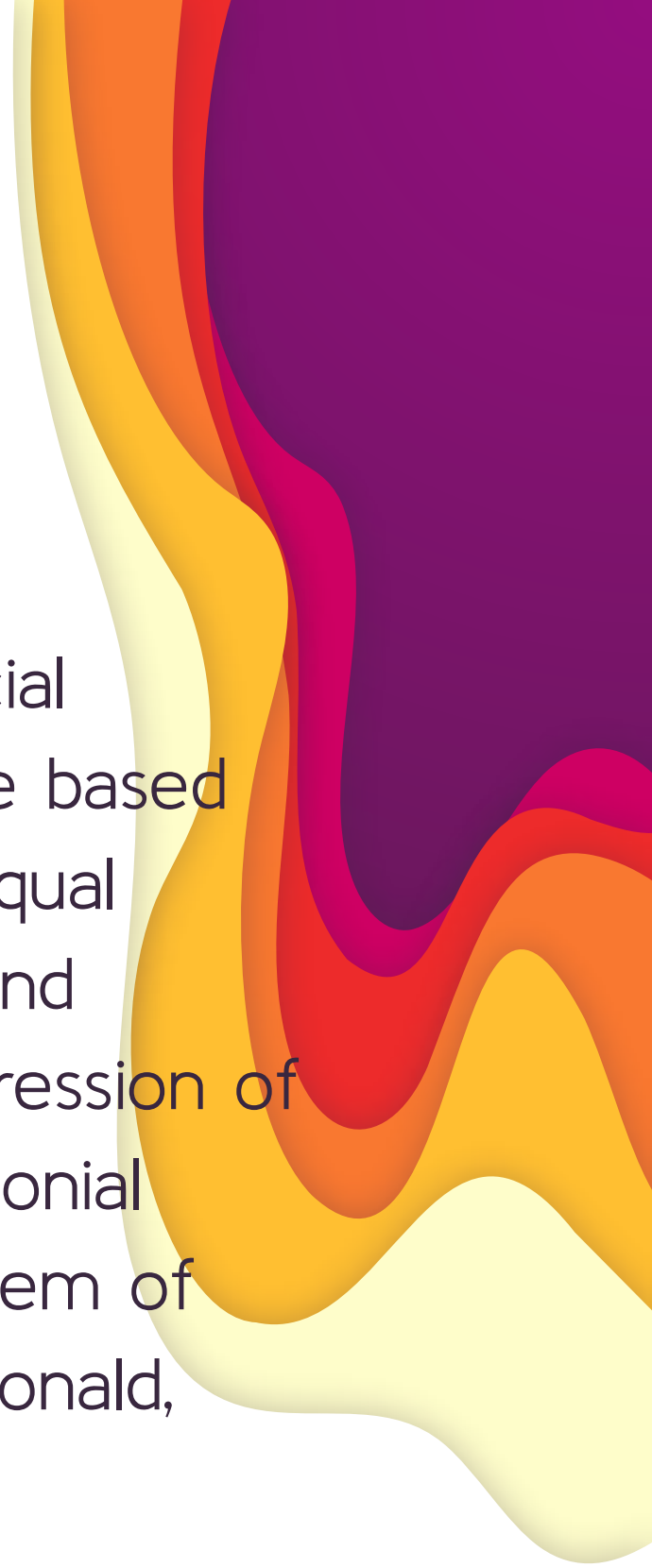
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Living in good relations requires us to learn and unlearn by “growing the ears to hear” (den Heyer, personal communication, September 12, 2020). We must be willing to examine our lived experiences, our education, and our worldviews on our path to learning to listen.

What are colonial logics?

Colonial logics include social organization and discourse based on displacement and unequal relations (Veracini, 2011), and reflects the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples by colonial settlers by creating a system of “insiders and outsiders” (Donald, 2009)

Colonial logics are not only evident throughout Canadian history, but persist systemically through Canada’s institutions today.



Characterizing Colonial Logics

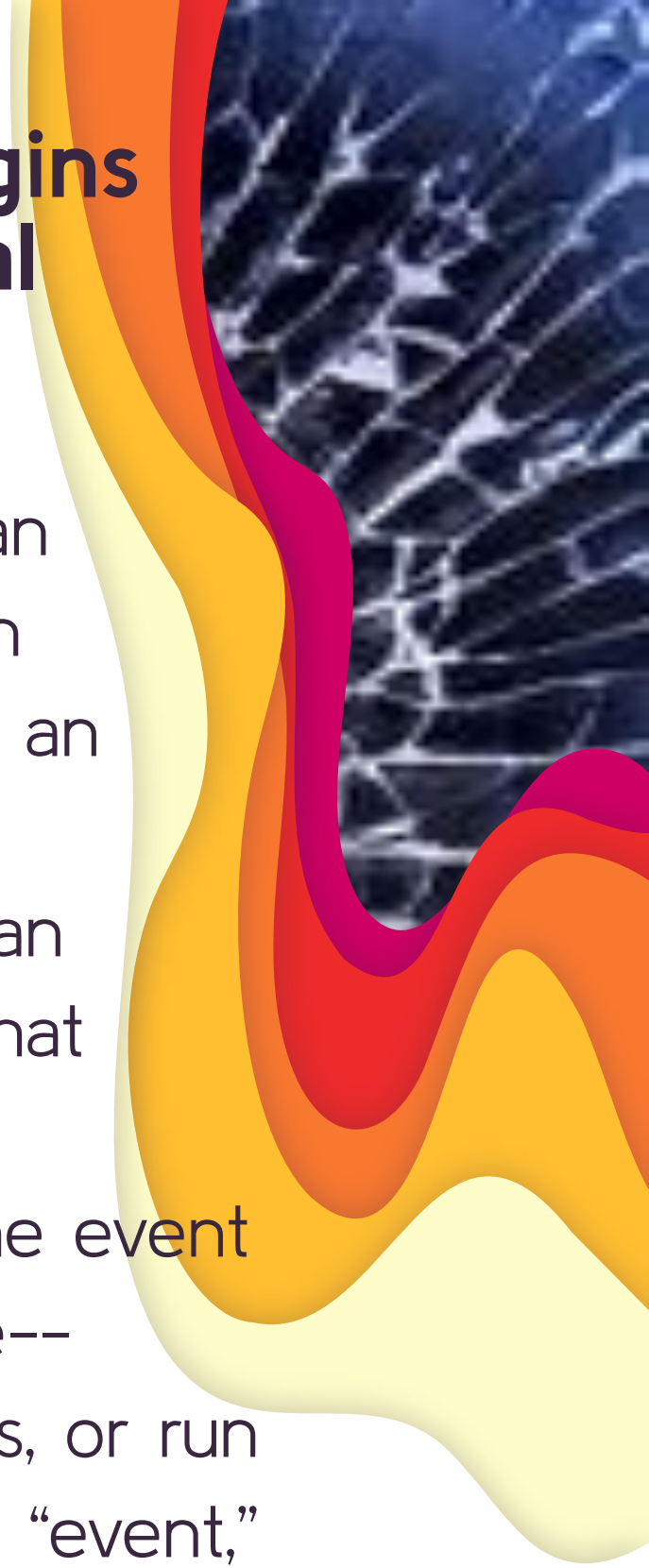
The characteristics of colonial logics are evident in western epistemologies and ontologies. Some of these include:

- linear progression of time (better now than we were before)
 - A destiny and a legacy - modernity as inevitable and a gift to humanity
 - The West as central and normative in relation to others
- (Willinsky, 1998)



Transformation Begins from an Educational “Event”

Following Badiou (2001), an educational transformation involves a “truth-process”: an “event” or encounter that produces a shattering or an upheaval of knowledge, that which one has previously understood to be true. The event presents us with a choice-- confront the truth-process, or run from it. As a result of this “event,” one may notice that the logics that frame one’s worldview make less sense to them. This can be an uncomfortable experience.



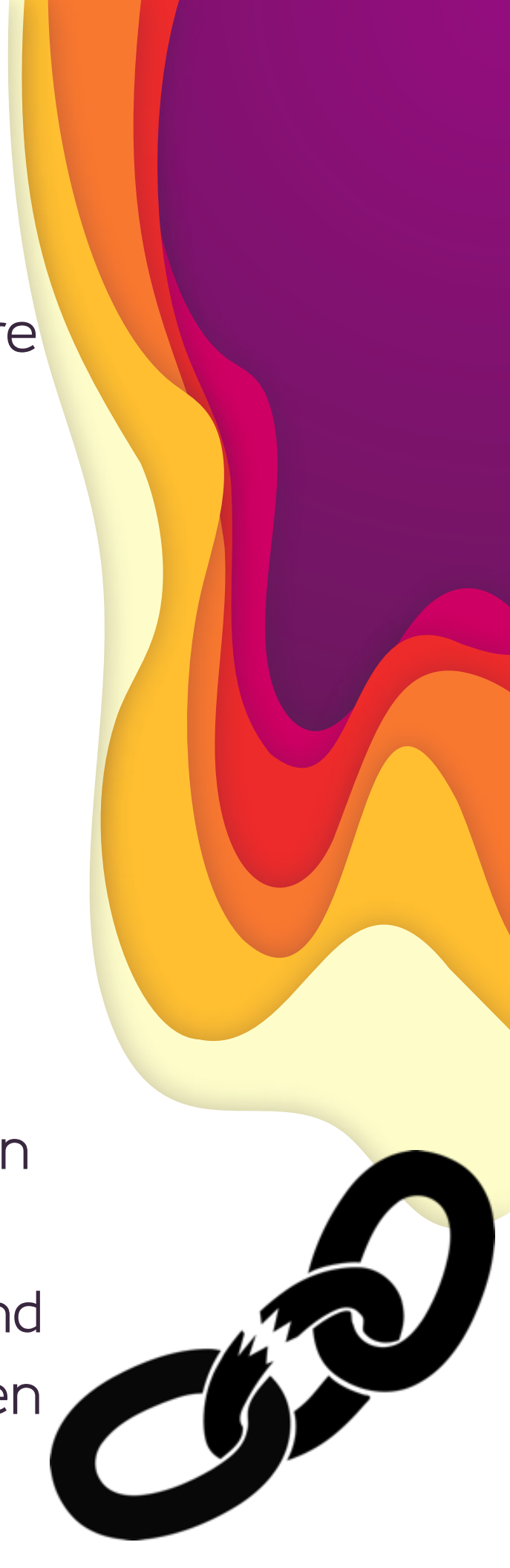
Beware of “Bears”

Interrogating one’s cultural worldview is dangerous territory. Cultural worldviews provide meaning to our lives. We also derive our self-esteem from our cultural worldview, which assures us that we are persons of value and worth in a world of meaning (Solomon, et al., 2015). As terror management theory will explain, when our worldview is threatened, we respond defensively, like how a bear might respond to defend its territory against intruders. Living in good relations requires us to poke the bear, but we must do so in such a way so as not to get mauled (den Heyer, personal communication, September 12, 2020).



Emotionality as a signal of relations and investments

When our worldviews are challenged, we can experience varying degrees of emotional discomfort. Terror management theory (TMT) offers an explanation for why we are existentially invested in our worldview, and therefore, helps to explain why we might experience discomfort and respond defensively when our worldview is challenged



What is TMT?

Terror management theory, or TMT, is based on the works of Ernest Becker (1973), an interdisciplinary cultural anthropologist who identified that one motivation of human behaviour was our awareness we will someday die. Because humans are abstract thinkers, we can fear death, even if death is not imminent (van Kessel et al., 2020).



Humans can be “terrorized” by the inevitability of death. As such, humans have sought comfort, belonging, and purpose through our cultural worldview (ascribing meaning to the world around us) and self-esteem (striving to be a person of value in a world of meaning) (Solomon et al., 2015).



Worldview, Culture, and White Supremacy

While all humans ascribe to a cultural worldview to shield them from death anxiety, cultural worldviews that favor white supremacy and colonial logics have been ingrained into many of the beliefs, values, laws, and institutions that have shaped liberal societies. Therefore, however harmful, many folks take comfort in this “lovely knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003), as it cocoons us from the reality of our impermanence.



Worldview, Culture, and White Supremacy

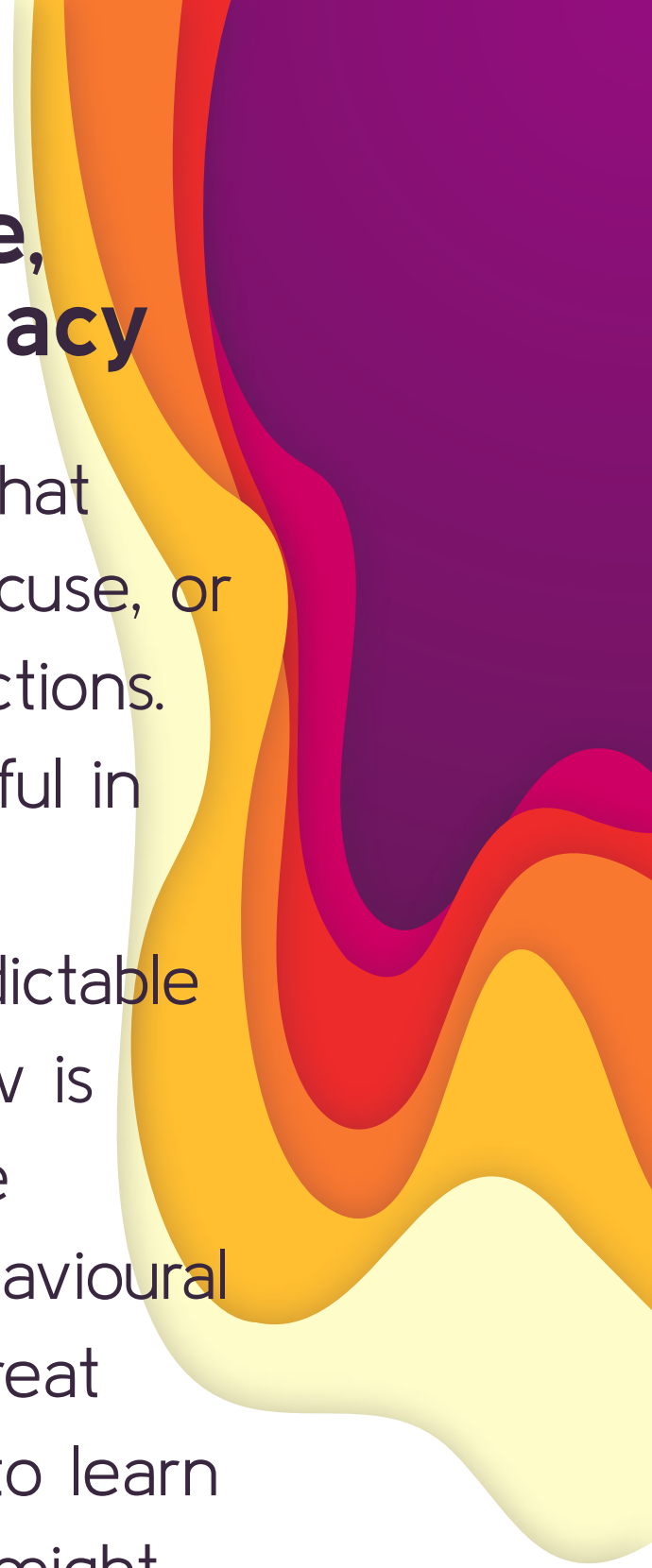
TMT suggests that death anxiety motivates us to protect our worldview. Those who ascribe to a dominant cultural worldview are susceptible to respond defensively when that worldview is threatened, even if that means inadvertently defending white supremacy.

Therefore, some people may respond defensively when their worldview is threatened, even if their worldview is known to cause harm.



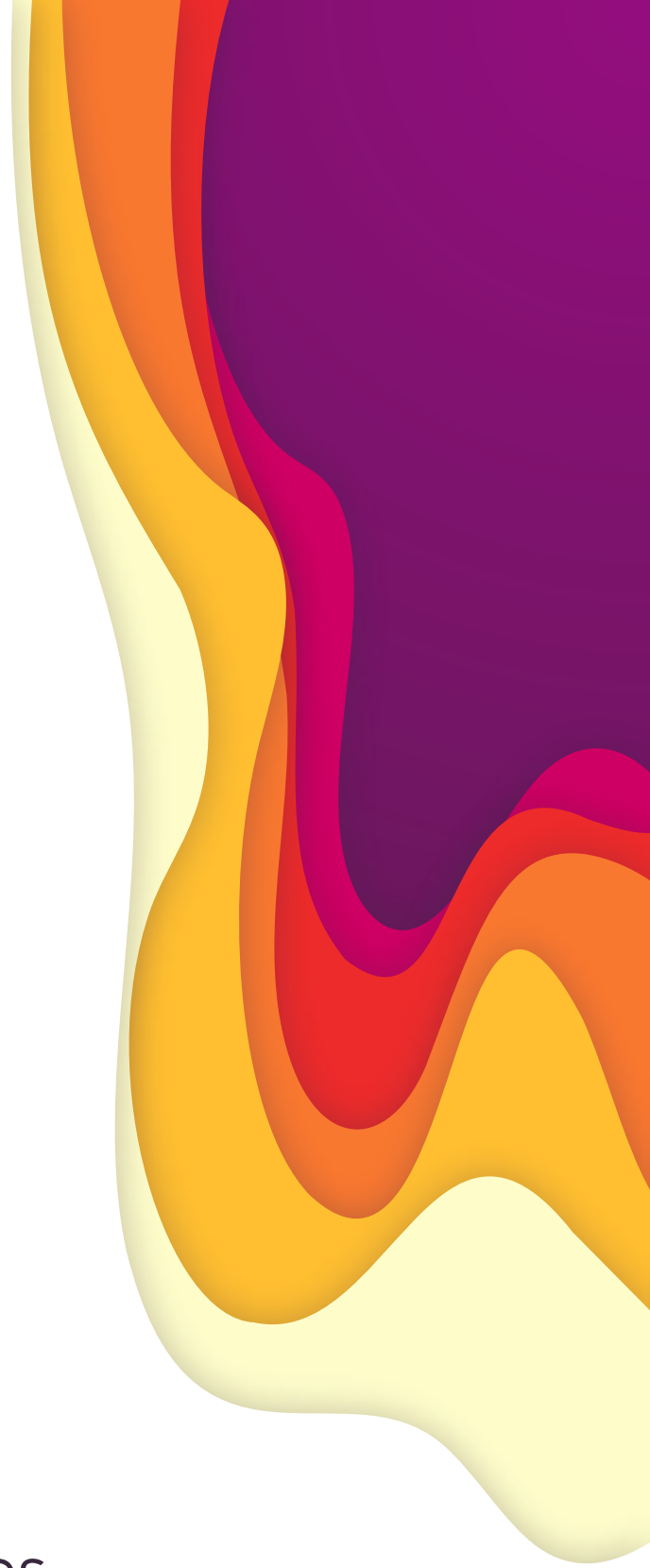
Worldview, Culture, and White Supremacy

It is important to be clear that TMT does not condone, excuse, or justify these defensive reactions. However, TMT can be helpful in explaining why humans will respond defensively in predictable ways when their worldview is threatened. Recognizing the affective, emotive, and behavioural responses to worldview threat may signal an opportunity to learn from what this discomfort might teach us, and from there proceed toward good relations.



Defensive Responses

TMT identifies four categories of defensive responses that emerge when one experiences worldview threat and specific behaviors in each category. This guide attempts to expand upon how these defensive responses manifest in social studies education. These defensive responses are *derogation*, *assimilation*, *accommodation*, and *annihilation*.



Defensive Responses and Centring Whiteness

While TMT validates that defensive responses to worldview threat are normal human behaviour, when we ignore or deny these behaviours, we can perpetuate harm. Defensive responses re-centre whiteness and colonial logics. The tricky part is that actions that sometimes appear or feel like “good relations” are, in fact, defensive responses, because “white supremacy obscures the reality that whiteness is present and [is] often ignored by those who possess it” (Hawkman & Shear, 2020, p. xxvii).

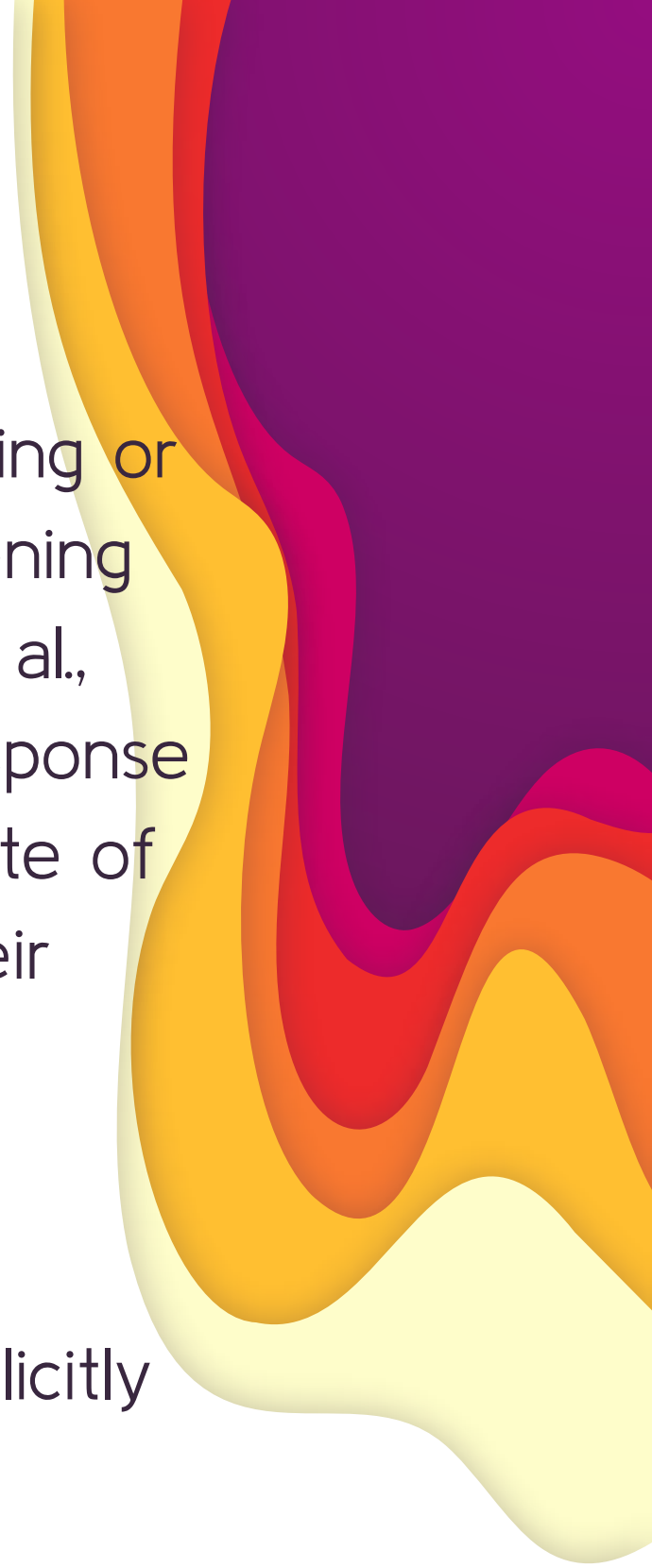


Derogation

Derogation involves belittling or dehumanizing the threatening worldview (van Kessel et al., 2020). This defensive response assures someone in a state of worldview threat that their worldview is superior by asserting that another worldview is inferior.

Derogation can occur explicitly through name-calling and hate-speech.

However, derogation can also occur in implicit ways that may be more difficult to detect.



Some examples of implicit derogation include:

- Describing sentient landscapes in Indigenous worldviews as as “myth, legend, or “alternative” ways of thinking (Marker, 2011, p. 104)
- Fixating on narratives, such as residential school histories, that portray Indigenous peoples as helpless or hopeless (Gebhard, 2017) and colonial settlers as heroes (Loewen, 1995) or victors (Willinsky, 1998)
- Individualizing systemic problems some Indigenous peoples experience, and blaming them for not being able to “fix” these problems (Gebhard, 2017; Johnson, 2019)

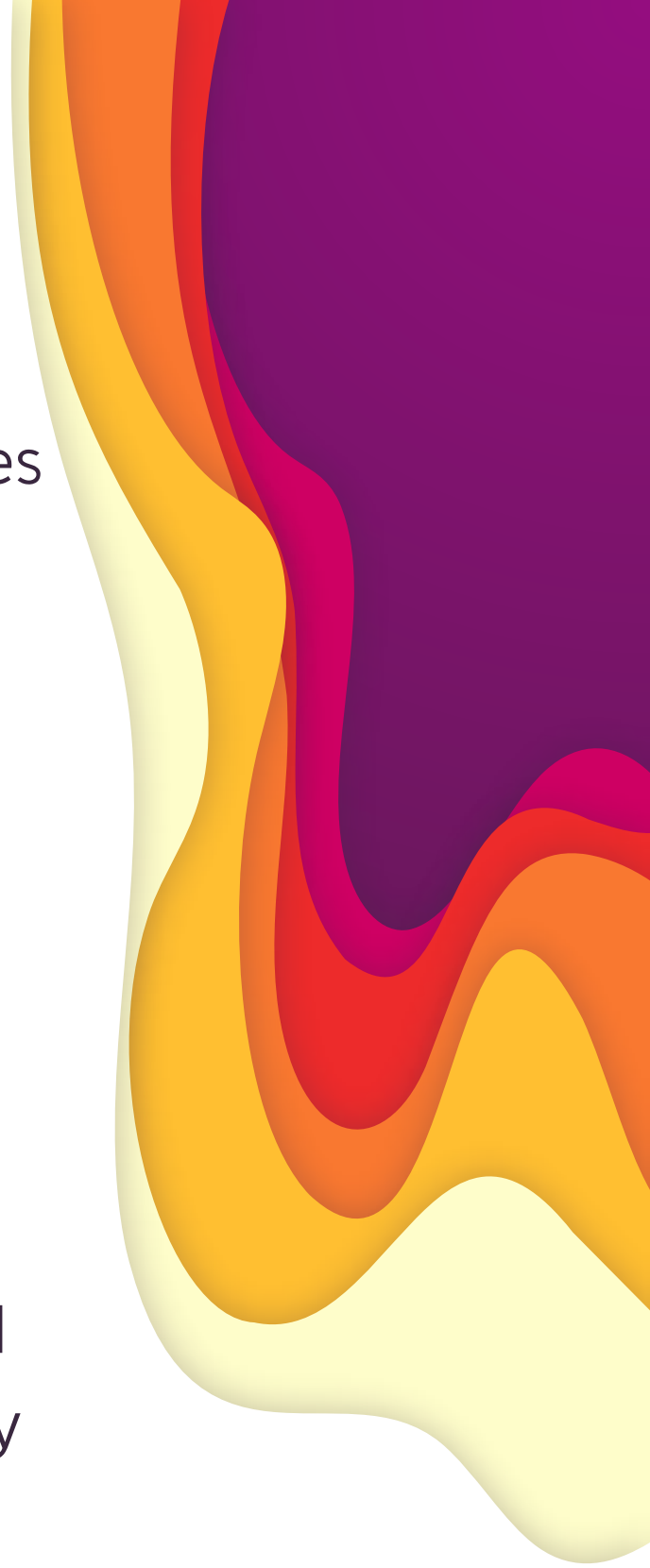
Assimilation

Assimilation involves trying to convert the threatening worldview to one's own worldview (van Kessel et al., 2020). Assimilation positions one's own worldview as dominant, desirable, and inevitable. For example, the Indian Act of 1867 legally protected assimilation policies and practices in Canada, including the operation of residential schools in order to protect a nationalist vision of Canada as a settler state.



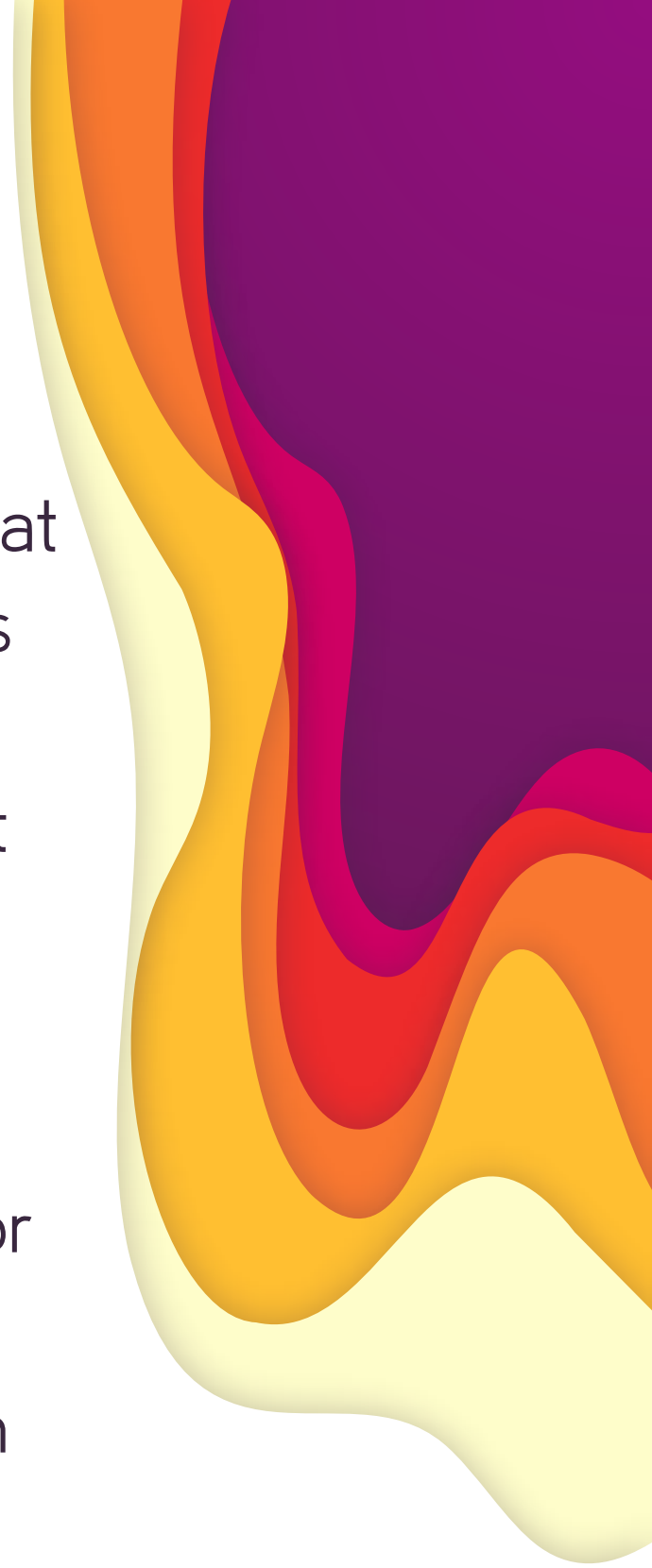
Even though the last residential school closed in 1996, assimilation practices continue today. Social studies education often defends colonial logics through assimilation in subtle ways, such as:

- Promoting Canadian national values such as multiculturalism and pluralism, but discounting or ignoring issues related of Indigenous sovereignty (Calderon, 2009)
- Misinterpreting Indigenous sovereignty as the pursuit of civil rights (Sabzalian, 2019)



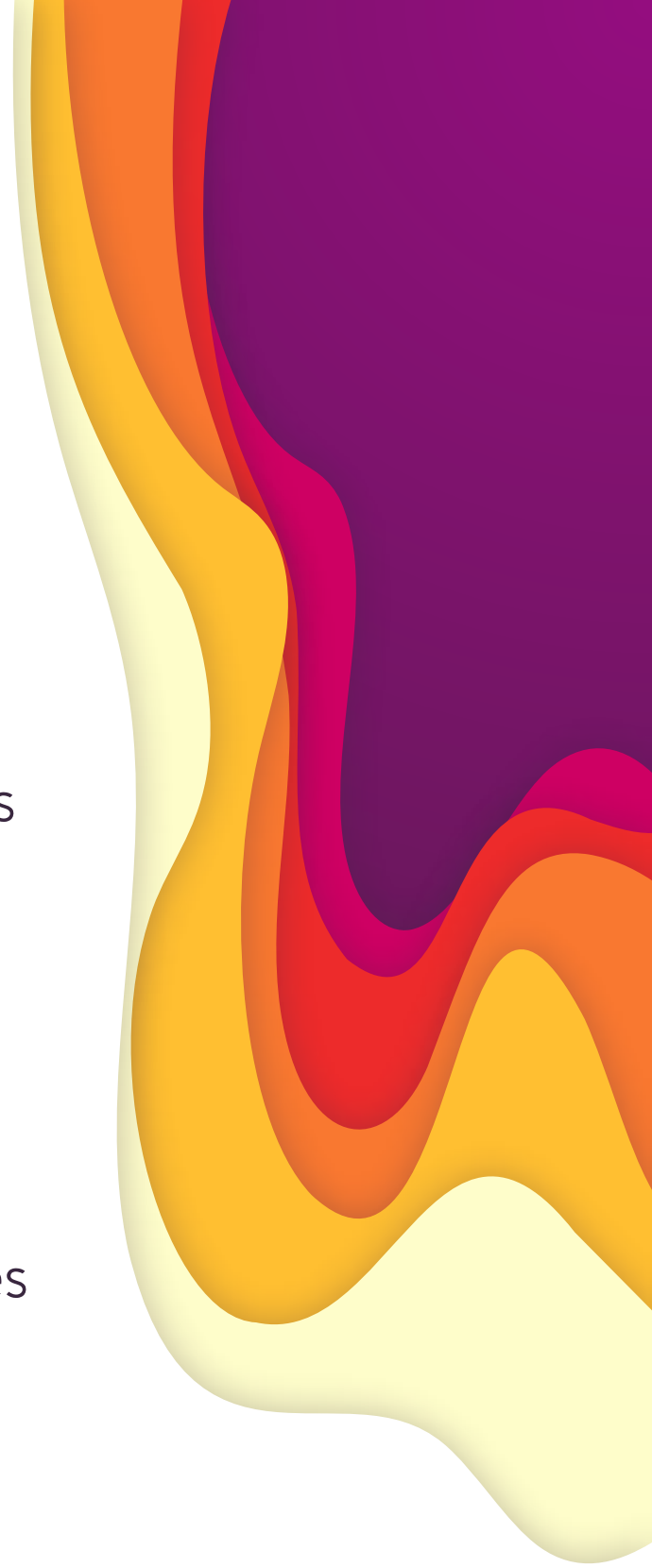
Annihilation

Annihilation refers to “aggressive action aimed at killing or injuring members of the threatening worldview” (van Kessel et al., 2020). Annihilation protects one’s worldview by eliminating the threatening worldview. For example, settlers decimating the buffalo on the Plains in Alberta was an attempt to annihilate Indigenous peoples.



While annihilation is often associated with literal killing, annihilation can also occur figuratively as a worldview defensive response. Some examples of this in social studies might include:

- Erasure of Indigenous peoples through grand narrative stories and language reproduced in textbooks (Raibmon, 2018)
- Displacement and marginalization (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013)
- Historicizing Indigenous peoples as a historical backdrop that have since been “modernized away” (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013; see also Francis, 1997)



Accommodation

Accommodation is a defensive response where one may modify one's worldview to adopt a part of the threatening worldview (van Kessel et al., 2020).

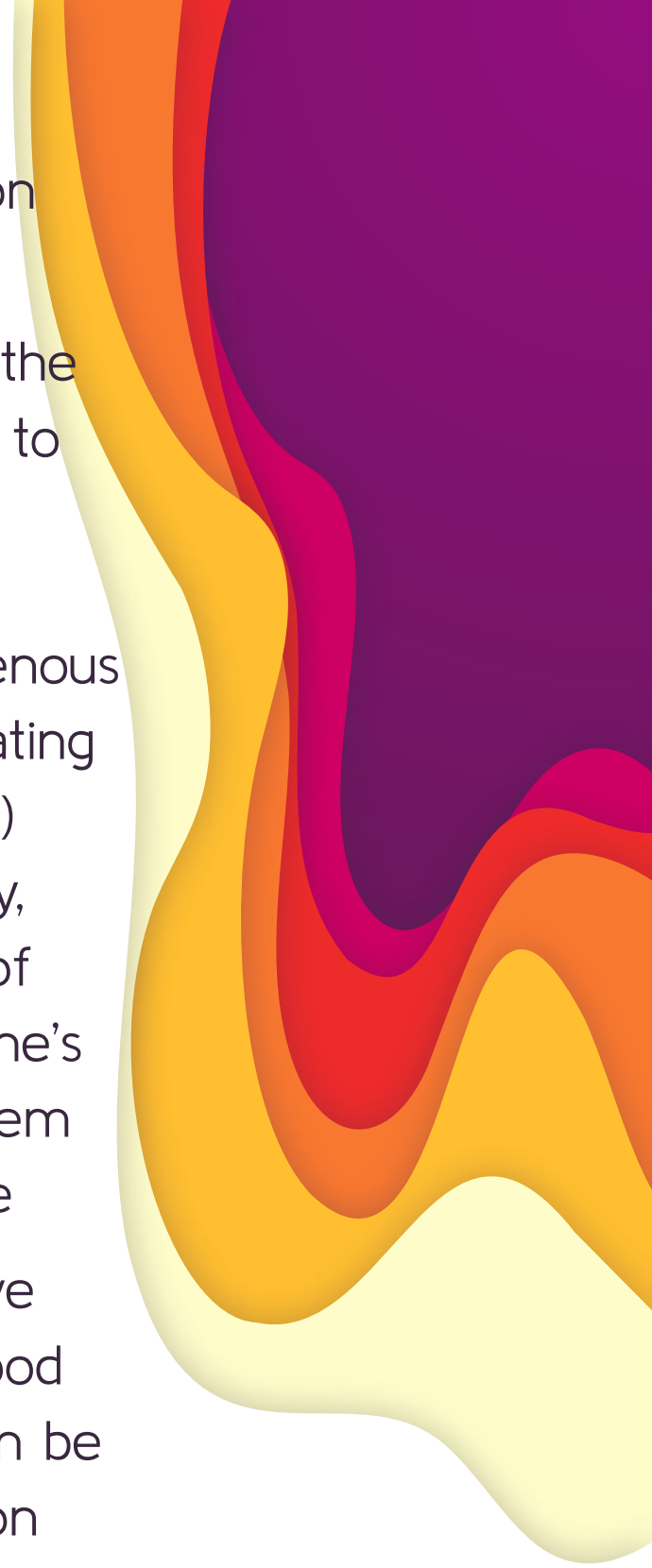
Accommodation is a defensive response because it does not require those in worldview threat to change any of their worldview. Instead, an accommodation defensive response adopts only a careful selection of aspects of the threatening worldview, while keeping one's worldview intact. It can sometimes be difficult to identify accommodation as a defensive response, because accommodating actions often masquerade as attempts at good treaty relations.



Some examples of accommodation include:

- Cultural appropriation such as the “tipis and costumes” approach to Indigenous education (Donald, 2009)
- Incorporating or infusing Indigenous perspectives without interrogating grand narratives (Donald, 2013)
- “Performative wokeness” (Gray, 2018) where token signalling of social justice actions bolster one’s own self-image and self-esteem rather than create real change

Because accommodation defensive responses can masquerade as “good teaching,” this defensive move can be difficult to identify. Accommodation focuses on keeping those in worldview threat comfortable with “lovely knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003).



The Neutrality Fallacy

Social studies teachers have long been told that they must be neutral or objective in the classroom (Geller, 2020). However, as TMT has demonstrated, because each of us (including teachers!) has a worldview, we tend not to remain neutral when our worldview is threatened. Instead, because we are emotionally connected to our worldview, we experience emotional reactions when our worldview is threatened. This can be awkward or uncomfortable for teachers who have been conditioned to keep their emotions out of their teaching.



From Worldview Threat Towards Good Relations

Emotional discomfort can signal a challenge to our worldview.

What we do with emotional discomfort is paramount to either a path towards good relations or responding defensively. Despite teachers' having been trained and socialized to believe that emotions are “counterproductive to any racially-just project” (Matias, 2016), our encounters with emotional discomfort in the face of worldview threat positions us at a crossroads.





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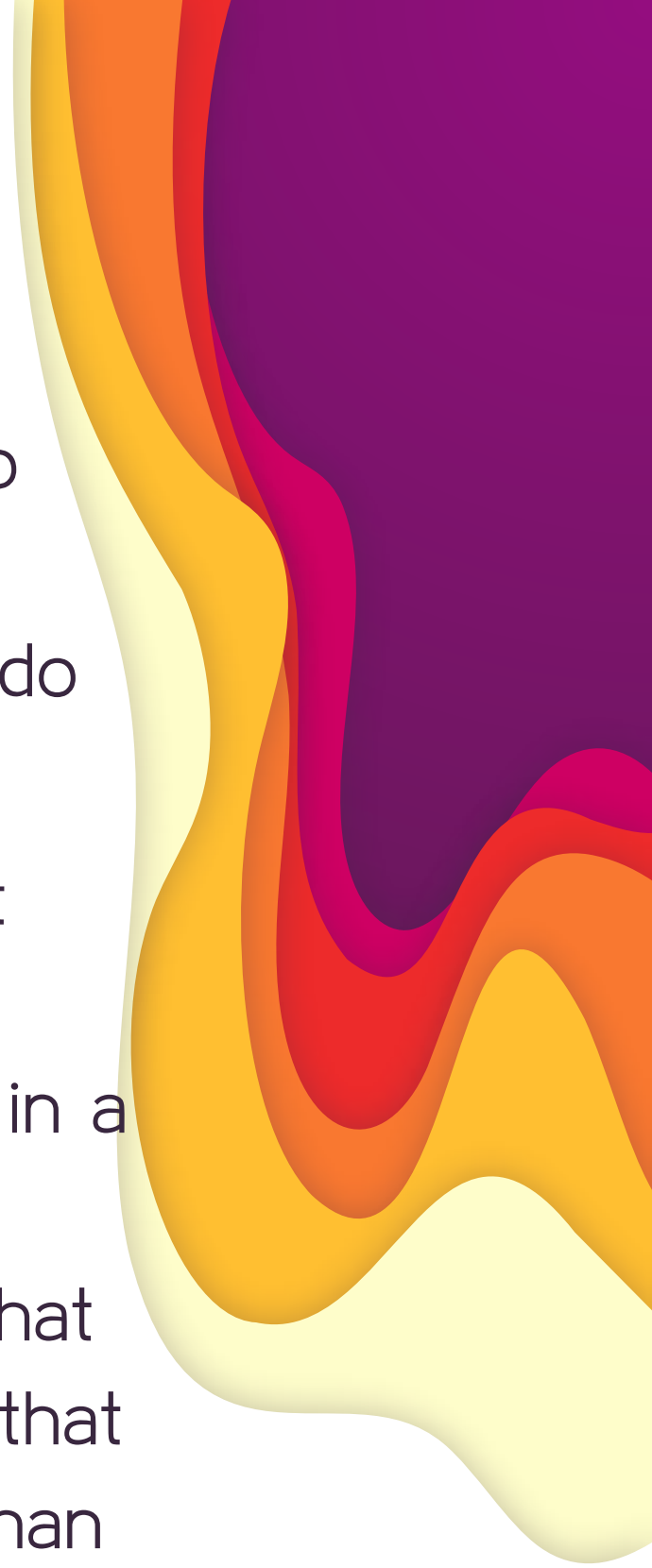
Speaking about anti-racist education, Leonardo (2016) writes: “Radical race educators do not seek to reduce the emotions that typically accompany racetalk, but redirect them towards social justice and greater understanding.”

More than Self-Reflection

If we make the choice to confront our emotional discomfort, what do we do then?

Boler (1999) cautions that we must do more than engage in self-reflection in a confessional sense.

Self-reflection assumes that we are self-improving-- that we are better off now than we once were, and this “assures no actual change” (p. 177).



Instead, helpful
questions might
be:

**What can this
discomfort
teach me?**

Then,

**How might I
proceed from
having learned
this?**



(Re)Reading Resources

From the position of confronting and sitting with the teachings of discomfort, teachers may view aspects of their practice differently. For example, while attaining new resources may be out of the question for some schools, teachers may engage in a (re)reading of classroom texts to uncover and interrogate colonial language and discourse (Gebhard, 2017; Raibmon, 2018).



Re-Storying

Teachers may also seek ways to interrogate grand narratives present in their existing resources with counter-stories. For example, Madden (2019) offers four types of counter-story narratives: refusal, resistance, resilience, and resurgence.



Discomfort is Recursive

We will experience recurring emotional discomforts that arise as a result of worldview threat. Moving towards good relations is not transactional, meaning, the work will be hard, and will not always feel rewarding. However, if we can remain faithful to the possibility of good relations, to “keep going,” (Badiou, 2001, p. 36; see also, den Heyer, 2014) by committing to sit with and learn from our emotional discomfort, then, good relations become possible.



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